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C O N F I D E N T I A L PANAMA 000660

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PM](#)
SUBJECT: PANAMA: DICHTER & NEIRA RESEARCH POLL

Classified By: POLCOUNS BRIAN R. NARANJO. REASON: 1.4 (d)

Summary

1. (C) In April 2008, Dichter & Neira published a public opinion poll that generated shock waves in Panama's political scene. Since then, this leading market research firm produced another poll conducted from June 06 to June 08 that indicated who could be the front runners for the presidential election. As the primary elections come to a close, the opposition parties have chosen their presidential nominees and the Revolutionary Democratic Party (PRD) will soon select its candidate. The Dichter & Neira poll provided insight to which presidential candidates will be left standing in the general election.

--PRD presidential candidate Balbina Herrera maintained the lead over Democratic Change (CD) candidate Ricardo Martinelli. Herrera continued to widen the gap as the PRD favorite with a 20 point lead over PRD contender and Mayor of Panama Juan Carlos Navarro.

--Panama's public believed that a PRD presidential candidate would win the general elections due to the party's intrinsic advantage granted by their large membership. With over 600,000 registered members, PRD remained the largest political party in the country.

--Martinelli remained the favored candidate for the opposition and maintained 41 percent support compared to Juan Carlos Varela who drew in 24 percent.

--President Torrijos' numbers continued to decline with less than a 47 percent approval rating. The Panamanian public was also dissatisfied with the President's cabinet and the National Assembly.

Dichter & Neira completed a subsequent poll in early July, but Post has not yet acquired a copy of it. Press reports regarding this more recent poll indicated that Herrera had opened an even wider lead, 31-point lead over Navarro. While Herrera stayed more or less steady in July polling about 54%, Navarro slipped to 23%. In the national polls, Herrera, Varela, and Martinelli were all three essentially tied in the low 20s between 21 and 24 percent. In addition to Herrera's growing lead in the PRD primary, the big news from Dichter & Neira's July poll was that post-primary Varela closed the gap with Herrera and Martinelli. Post will endeavor to acquire a copy of the July poll. End summary.

Herrera, Front Runner in General Elections

¶2. (SBU) Were the presidential elections held in June, 26 percent of respondents say they would have voted for PRD candidate Balbina Herrera. Herrera continued to lead with a 1 percent increase from April levels. Democratic Change (CD) candidate Ricardo Martinelli slipped from 20 percent in April to 19 percent in May but remained steady through June. PRD challenger Juan Carlos Navarro gained traction with a 2 point increase to 15 percent from April to June. Panamenista candidate Juan Carlos Varela remained static at 7 percent. Polling results showed that all candidates have maintained steady popularity among their supporters. In contrast, PRD candidate Laurentino Cortizo received minimal backing with less than 1 percent. Of the respondents interviewed, 16 percent were undecided.

Candidate	April	May	June
Balbina Herrera	25	26	26
Ricardo Martinelli	20	19	19
Juan Carlos Navarro	13	15	15
Juan Carlos Varela	7	6	7

Voter Confidence in the Candidate

¶3. (SBU) When respondents were asked how certain they were that they would vote for their present candidate of choice on election day, Balbina Herrera polled the strongest voter confidence among her supporters with 88 percent affirming that they were "very certain" or "certain" to vote for her. Loyalty among Martinelli supporters increased 6 points to 85 percent from 79 percent. Juan Carlos Navarro remained steady among his voting base with 84 percent. Juan Carlos Varela enjoyed an increase in voter confidence by 5 points to 89 percent. However, it is interesting to note that while most presidential candidates remained steady or experienced a slight increase among voters that were "very certain" to support their candidate, Balbina Herrera's numbers dropped 17 percent in this category to 32 percent from 49 percent in May.

Herrera Remained PRD Favorite

¶4. (SBU) Balbina Herrera maintained a strong lead over Juan Carlos Navarro with 57 percent compared to Navarro's 34 percent. Supporters of the governing PRD party continued to assert that Herrera was their preferred presidential candidate. Herrera's significant 22 point gap over Navarro appeared unbreakable between May and June.

Poll	Herrera	Navarro
May 2008	58%	36%
June 2008	57%	34%

Martinelli Leads Opposition

¶5. (SBU) Martinelli held as the number one candidate for president among opposition voters. The candidate experienced a slight 3 point decrease from 44 percent in May to 41 percent in June. Strong support for Martinelli existed outside of Panama City with 53 percent of residents in Chiriqui and Bocas supporting the candidate compared to 39 percent in Panama City and Colon. Martinelli also received solid backing from the youth demographic (ages 18 to 29) with 53 percent of youth voters supporting Martinelli compared to 44 percent of Panamanians aged 30 to 49. Opposition challenger Juan Carlos Varela polled a steady 24 percent in both May and June. The percentage of undecided voters within the opposition party decreased 4 points to 9 percent.

(Comment: The evaporating percentage of undecided voters could suggest that Martinelli would remain the opposition's candidate of choice.)

The Governing Party vs. The Opposition

¶16. (SBU) When asked which political party was most likely to win the election, 44 percent of respondents believed that the PRD's candidate would secure the presidency. Confidence in an opposition victory increased 4 points from 33 percent in May to 37 percent in June. However, confidence in a PRD victory remained static at 44 percent in May and June. Noteworthy is that 20 percent of respondents interviewed remained uncertain, a number large enough to have a definite impact on the 7 point gap between the PRD and the opposition.

¶17. (SBU) Of the respondents that stated a PRD presidential candidate would win the general election, 32 percent considered that the party's advantage as the country's biggest political organization would be the determining factor to win the election. In contrast, the primary factor that secured support for the opposition was the party's "vision for the future". Among opposition sympathizers, this dynamic increased 7 points from 19 percent in May to 26 percent in June. In comparison, 14 percent of PRD supporters believed their political party had a "vision for the future".

¶18. (SBU) Another important factor noted by respondents is the level of organization within the parties. 19 percent of PRD supporters felt that the party was tightly organized compared to 16 percent within the opposition. Overall belief in the PRD's organization decreased 5 points from 23 percent to 19 percent, while the opposition decreased from 19 to 16 percent.

Continuing Waning Government Approval

¶19. (SBU) Torrijos' approval ratings continued to decline, falling from 51 percent in May to 47 percent in June. Along with the President's depleting popularity, his administration's approval rating dropped by 6 points from 46 percent in May to 40 percent in June.

¶10. (SBU) The GOP's legislative branch, the National Assembly, also received poor performance reviews. When asked to rate the quality of the National Assembly as excellent, good, bad, or very bad, 52 percent of respondents believed the quality of the National Assembly was bad and 10 percent viewed the legislative branch performance as very bad.

Technical Information

¶11. (SBU) Dichter & Neira conducted this poll from June 6 to June 8. All interviews were conducted face-to-face. Only adults over the age of 18 were interviewed in their homes. Homes were selected randomly, and the number of homes selected in a particular area was in proportion to general population distribution according to socio-economic standing.

Interviews were distributed evenly between men and women. No interviews were conducted by telephone, at places of work, public places, or on the street. Interviews were distributed by age group, socio-economic status, and education in proportion with general population distribution. A total of 1,200 people were interviewed across the country, excluding the Darien province and the Camarcas. The company asserted a 95 percent level of confidence with a margin of error of 2.9 percent.

Comments

¶12. (C) Polling in Panama indicates a high degree of voter apathy and general disinterest in politics. Of the 1,200 respondents interviewed 56 percent were not affiliated with any political party. When respondents were asked which presidential candidate they would vote for in the general election, 16 percent were undecided and 10 percent stated they would not support any of the candidates. In addition, 20 percent of those interviewed were uncertain whether they supported the governing PRD party or the opposition. This dynamic could indicate that independents would decide the 2009 general elections. Absent an enormous surge in the final six weeks of the PRD primary campaign, Herrera appears to have sewed up the PRD's presidential nomination. Press reports of Dichter & Neira's July poll, a copy of which Post is endeavoring to obtain, indicate that Herrera has opened up an even wider lead over Navarro. While in this poll, Martinelli also secured a 16 point advantage over Varela, Dichter & Neira's June poll was conducted about one month before Varela trounced Alberto Vallarino in the Panamenista Party's July 6 primary. Press reports of Dichter & Neira's July poll, conducted a couple of days after the Panamenista Primary, indicated that Varela leapt forward in the national polls closing the gap with Martinelli and drawing more or less even with Martinelli and Herrera. At this stage in the race, it appears that a three-way race for president is forming: Martinelli, whose CD has formed an alliance with Patriotic Union (UP), Varela, whose Panamenista Party is expected to align with the Movement of Liberal Republican Nationals (MOLIRENA), and Herrera.

STEPHENSON